

VOLUME 275  
NUMBER 19

Suggested retail price  
75 cents  
\$1.00 outside of  
Greater Boston

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# The Boston Globe

MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2009

PITS AND PENT-UP GLUM

TODAY: Cloudy, with flurries throughout day; highs 32-37

TOMORROW: Coastal storm could bring snow; highs 29-34

HIGH TIDE: 5:31 a.m., 6:09 p.m.  
SUNRISE: 7:09 SUNSET: 4:42

FULL REPORT: PAGE B11

## The lasting value of the humanities

By David Tebaldi

**H**ISTORY, literature, philosophy, and the other humanities disciplines — of what use are they? Stanley Fish, the erudite blogger for The New York Times, has argued recently that they are of no use at all. Paradoxically, that is precisely why they are important, according to Fish.

I beg to differ, and so too would former Rhode Island senator Claiborne Pell, who died on New Year's Day and is best remembered for the student financial aid program that bears his name — Pell Grants. Less appreciated was Pell's seminal role in the founding of the National Endowment for the Humanities and its sister agency, the National Endowment for the Arts.

The legislation sponsored by Pell in 1965 established the humanities endowment with a mandate to foster "national progress" in the humanities. In some of the loftiest language ever to appear in federal legislation, the act declared that "a high civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone but must give full value and support to the other great branches of man's scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present and a better view of the future."

Through its grant making and other activities, the endowment preserves and provides access to cultural and intellectual resources that help to define us as a people; strengthens teaching and learning in the humanities in schools and colleges across the nation; facilitates basic research and original scholarship in the humanities; and provides opportunities for Americans to use the humanities both for personal enrichment and to improve civic life.

Over the past 40 years, nearly 100,000 high school and college teachers have deepened their knowledge of the humanities and honed their classroom skills through intensive summer study supported by the endowment, tens of thousands of scholars have received funding for research and writing projects, and tens of millions of Americans have been enlightened and entertained by endowment-funded documentaries such as Ken Burns's "The Civil War."

In keeping with Pell's vision, local affiliates of the endowment exist in every state. Ours is called Mass Humanities. With funds provided by the national endowment, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and private donors, Mass Humanities supports and conducts humanities programs that strengthen civic life across the Commonwealth.

The benefits of the Pell Grants are easily comprehended. The benefits of humanities programs are less readily identifiable. Certainly we all understand that a teacher who attends an NEH seminar will become a more knowledgeable and enthusiastic teacher, and a youngster who watches "Eyes on the Prize" will come away with a greater awareness that civic freedoms and rights are matters for which all of us bear responsibility.

But what is generally not considered is the capacity of the humanities to ennoble and enrich the lives of average citizens, and to make them more complete human beings and more capable of sustaining themselves and their communities. Here in Massachusetts, for example, the Clemente Course in the Humanities offers college-level humanities courses free to adults living in or near poverty in Boston, Holyoke, and New Bedford. Graduates of the program receive six college credits and, more important, they acquire resources that enable them to take fuller control of their lives, enhance the well-being of their families, and become more effective participants in civic life.

In difficult economic times, humanities programs may seem a luxury, something we can do without. Like Pell Grants, however, humanities programs are even more important in hard times. Indeed, this is a time to consider a dramatic increase in the NEH appropriation, which is, and always has been, woefully inadequate.

History teaches us how those who came before us have confronted the challenges of the past; literature provides insights into human needs, desires, and motivations; philosophy helps to clarify and illuminate what, in the end, is truly of value. Taken together, the humanities give us a fuller sense of what is possible, desirable, and right.

Pell understood the usefulness of the humanities. We should be grateful for the legacy he has left us.

*David Tebaldi is executive director of Mass Humanities.*